



## Lost Harmony: Tarkovsky's "The Mirror" and "The Stalker"

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cious in the context of the contemporary commercial cinema (it was, of course, produced independently). The logical corollary is that it also cannot proceed as far in its thematic development, in terms of a revolutionary break with the past. Nonetheless, beside today's weary rehashes of the attitudes and narrative procedures of the Hollywood past, it stands as a reminder of the degree to which traditional narrative can be bent and stretched into progressive forms.\*

The parallels between the two films are striking. Like the occupants of the "house of fiction"—though in a less elaborated and complex way—Romero's zombies, mindlessly gravitating to the shopping mall, represent the habits of the past from which the living characters must strive to extricate themselves (the make-up of the ghosts in the last part of Rivette's film, as they lose their potency, is almost identical). The film never reaches anything comparable to the positive image of women in *Céline and Julie*, but it follows Fran's development as she progressively casts off the entrapments of patriarchy: notions of the woman

as inferior, as helpless, as irrational, as passive; the acceptance of herself as an image for the gaze of the male; crucially, the idea of marriage as norm. At the end of the film the emblems of male power are either transferred to the woman or surrendered (Fran flies the helicopter, the surviving male relinquishes the rifle to the zombies). The film even offers an equivalent for the rescue of Madlyn in Fran's unborn child, carried out of the clutches of the past towards an uncertain and precarious future. There is also, throughout the film, a strong element of play, in the stylized comic-strip violence, in the film's awareness of itself as genre movie, as fantasy: the audience is invited to participate in a macabre and bloody game that manages to remain, by virtue of the stylization, at once fundamentally serious and good-humored.

It is clear that the most audacious and radical films will continue to be made outside the commercial mainstream. Yet the co-presence in seventies cinema of *Céline and Julie* and *Dawn of the Dead* suggests the possibility of significant parallel developments in different spheres of independent film-making, at different removes from the mainstream. Our delight in story-telling and story-hearing, while it needs to be carefully scrutinized, does not have to be abandoned.

\*Further, I would not be prepared to assert that *Céline and Julie* is the greater film, a caveat that may offset any temptation to misread one as seeking to establish formal innovation as an *absolute* criterion of excellence.

MICHAEL DEMPSEY

# Lost Harmony

## Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* and *The Stalker*

The vagaries of distribution, and probably politics, brought Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky's two most recent films, *The Mirror* (1974) and *The Stalker* (1980), to Filmex this year simultaneously, despite the gap between their original release dates.

It is hard to think of a widely admired filmmaker who seems more enigmatic than Tarkovsky. Partly, this stems from the rarity of Russian movies on American screens, though maybe the recent art-house successes of *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (surprise winner of 1981's Oscar for Best Foreign Film) and of *Oblomov* will loosen up the situation a bit.

Tarkovsky's first feature, *My Name Is Ivan* (*Ivan's Childhood*) played some American dates during the early sixties, when "art movies" were an exotic genre unto themselves here, but it has seldom been revived since then. A cut version of *Andrei Roublev* (1966) has been appearing from time to time in occasional museum or one-night theater showings lately; and *Solaris* (1972), likewise cut, has become a fixture in the cult circuit and among sci-fi lovers. Few Americans, then, can have seen his films often enough to evaluate them confidently; fewer still seem to have knowledge of enough contemporary Russian movies to place

them in any adequate context. Added to which, we have the vague stories that float out of Russia from time to time about Tarkovsky's "difficulties" with the Soviet establishment, which is said to object to his style of movie-making, supposedly because his style and concerns are too rarified for the "masses" who, the cliché has it, must be appealed to with the clear-cut, propagandizing "boy-meets-tractor" epics of Socialist Realism. The long years between Tarkovsky's productions, the rationale for letting him work at all despite all these objections by the government, the arrangements between him and the authorities—we remain in the dark about all these, even after accounts by Westerners with good Russian contacts, like Herbert Marshall and Ivor Montagu (*Sight and Sound*, Spring 1976 & Spring 1973).

But even if all these mysteries cleared up tomorrow, Tarkovsky would still have an aura of the enigmatic, the intractable, the ineffable about him. Like his closest Western counterpart, Stanley Kubrick, he tends to make what Gene Youngblood once called "trance" films, characterized by slow, dreamlike pacing created with large, static tableaux, stately camera movements, and an extensive use of classical music. Instead of the Marxist certainties promulgated by the rulers of his country, Tarkovsky pursues a degree of uncertainty, which can be called mystical or merely vague, depending on your outlook. Implicitly, his style and his concern with large abstractions like Love and Nature deny that materialism and rationality can explain everything. His taste for cosmic mystery has a religious tinge which makes him comparable to Alexandr Solshenitzyn, except that he replaces the writer's overbearing nineteenth-century Russian Orthodoxy with a mistier, virtually oceanic pantheism and humanism.

All by themselves, words like these might seem to be describing an impossibly dewy-eyed naïf. But Tarkovsky is almost always able to ground his preoccupations in poetic, tactile images. The early shots of the anomic astronaut in *Solaris*, staring at grasses as they ripple hypnotically beneath the surface of a pond, could be his signature shots; the mesmerizing, balletic sway of the grasses bears witness to a powerfully infectious belief in the natural world as the embodiment of a primal peace which we can regain. This vision of lost harmony is what haunts every aspect of Tarkovsky's work, from his choice of colors to his liking for entranced tracking shots through forests to his recurring interest in the commingled joys and

sorrows of memory. His expansive crane shots of the steppe where a teenage boy attempts to cast a mighty bell, in *Andrei Roublev*, or that film's final shift from black-and-white for the brutality and loneliness of medieval Russia to color for the vivid icons of the almost unknown title character express a heroic optimism about the force of artistic expression arrayed against all the forms of dark powers in the world. Similarly, although the memory-releasing ability of the planet Solaris unbalances the scientists who work there by conjuring up phantasms from their tormented pasts, it also enables the strongest of them to purge himself of numbing alienation from life. When the astronaut's late wife, who had killed herself over intractable problems with the marriage, reappears as a floating ghost, her very movement through the air, eerily soft and lovely, and the delicate beauty of actress Natalie Bondarchuk are Tarkovsky's means of imbuing us as well as his deadened hero with revived pleasure in existence. At his best, Tarkovsky is enraptured, as much by movies as by his favorite abstractions, which is why he is able to prevent them from drying out into mere abstractions. He is a kind of Walt Whitman, with a sense of moonstruck awe instead of a barbaric yawn.

But something has changed in *The Mirror* and *The Stalker*; the Tarkovsky spirit of struggling but finally soaring hope has clouded. In these films, he works with much the same material as before. With its collage of memories from a boy's rural life with his abandoned mother, plus concurrent newsreels of World War II, the Stalin era, and more recent times, *The Mirror* reworks and expands the earth-bound aspects of *Solaris*, which are marked by marital and father-son agonies in a pristine natural setting. *The Stalker*, contrasting a silted-over, trashed-out urban society with the allure of a mysterious, cordoned-off natural wonderland known as The Zone, is viewable as a contemporary companion piece to *Andrei Roublev*, which presents equally sharp contrasts between dazzling landscapes and the barbaric wounds inflicted on their inhabitants in the name of what passes for civilization. But in *The Mirror*, the broken home, the lost loves remain irretrievable, both in fact and through any form of contemplative consolation, including the artistry which brings them back to life for us. And in *The Stalker* the promise of The Zone—that a Room somewhere in its midst can make one's profoundest wishes come true—is not merely betrayed, it is pathetically betrayed, leaving the horrors of pollut-

ing modernity dominant and the battered title character clinging to the remnants of his quest for transcendence.

Herbert Marshall's account of how Soviet authorities and several of Tarkovsky's fellow directors reacted when they first saw *The Mirror* has them all complaining about its obscurity, its refusal (or its inability) to make itself easily understood by a mass audience. For different reasons, naturally, they all sound amazingly like baby moguls in Hollywood scratching their heads over this artsy whacko who, if you can believe it, doesn't like money. However, wrong reasons or not, they are right in their basic observation; *The Mirror* is an extremely puzzling film. The looking glass that it offers us is not merely cracked but shattered, and we are seeing the jagged, jumbled reflections of its scattered shards. Tarkovsky begins this 90-minute montage of memories, stock footage, and fantasy with black-and-white shots of a stuttering boy whom an offscreen therapist is trying to cure with hypnosis. As the boy fights his recalcitrant tongue and finally breaks through to coherent speech ("I can speak!"), we suppose that he will turn out to be the focal figure of the movie. But he never reappears; his predicament and his victory over it are evidently meant to be metaphorical. The problem is, to extend the metaphor in a way that Tarkovsky probably did not intend, that the film's eruptions of semi-disconnected, non-narrative scenes feel like the boy's stutter yet do not break through to his final burst of clarity. *The Mirror* finally speaks only dimly

because nobody, nothing quite manages to take this boy's place as either an organizing principle or a center of consciousness.

Tarkovsky tries to place another boy, Ignat, in this role. Evidently a surrogate for himself, Ignat lives with his mother during the World War II years in a small cabin-like home near a meadow, surrounded by luxuriant trees and other greenery which become seedbeds of his memories. These, in turn, reach us partially via narrated comments by a male voice which appears to represent the grown-up Ignat/Tarkovsky. Breaking into them further are occasional quotations from the poems of Tarkovsky's father, who (as fictionalized in the film) has left Ignat's mother, disgusted with his failure at the age of forty to escape what he considers his innate mediocrity as a writer. In addition, shots of the Spanish Civil War, the sufferings of bedraggled Soviet troops struggling against the Nazi invaders, and hero-worshipping Chinese crowds acclaiming Mao jump in and out of the film's imagistic flow. Sometimes immediate connections between this archival material and the other shots are instantly obvious, as when Tarkovsky shows us children in Spain forcibly placed aboard trains for removal from war-torn areas or dead soldiers dangling from tree-caught parachutes. And even when a specific reason for this or that piece of editing does not leap promptly to mind, we can view the newsreel footage in a general way—as, for instance, History, in contrast to the rest of the movie, which may be taken to represent what the capital H always

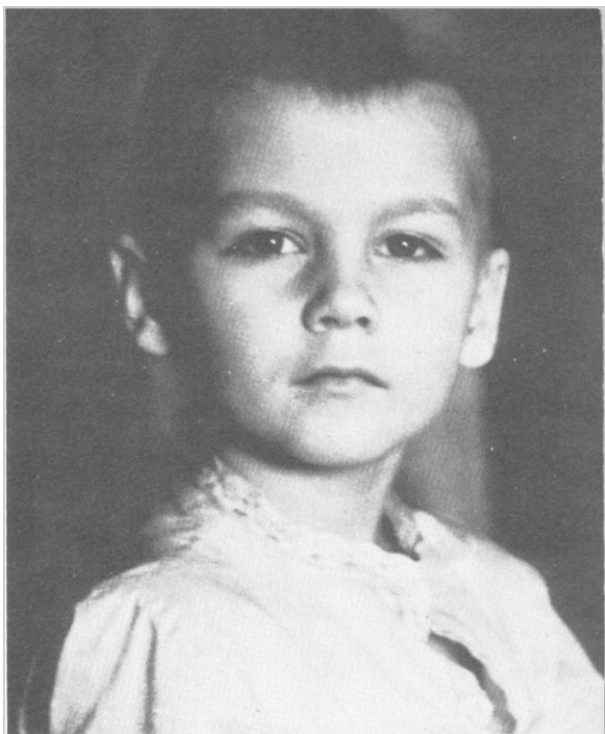


Natalie  
Bondarchuk  
in  
SOLARIS

fails to encompass of human existence. But this “generality” (this blurriness, in fact)—which extends to Tarkovsky’s use of two actresses, one young, the other (his actual mother) old to portray Ignat’s mother—eventually overcomes the film, leaving it a tantalizing but unknit collection of “haunting” shots.

But, leaving aside judgments like this one, which is based on only one look at the film, *The Mirror* is approachable as a thesaurus of Tarkovsky’s past interests and the darker light that he is throwing on them here and in *The Stalker*. Again, he focuses on the breakup of family life, expressed here as an impacted mass of reveries (a neighboring house bursting into flames repeatedly, slow-motion shots of rain pouring into Ignat’s home and his mother wallowing ecstatically beneath the debris that the water brings crashing down), like mental loops. Although Tarkovsky is aware of family life’s psychic strains and repressions, he continually returns to it as a source of both loving intimacy and poetic imagination—which, of course, may make him as suspect in certain American circles as he may be with the Russian film establishment. Ignat’s mother he makes as luminous an icon of mercurial beauty and persistent devotion as the resurrected wife of *Solaris*. The first image of her, as a young woman sitting on a fence and gazing out over a glorious meadow, is characteristic, almost a John Ford shot of the Woman Who Waits. Later, a co-worker at the printing plant where she works (ever fearful, like everyone else, of a printing mistake which might land everybody in political trouble) accuses her of being too independent, and others chime in that they are surprised her husband stayed with her as long as he did. But Tarkovsky saves a big close-up for her dismissal of these comments. Obviously, he is fascinated by the dignity that he perceives in the figure of the abandoned wife. Yet he cannot (or so one viewing makes it seem) clarify the repeated failures of his men to deal straightforwardly with these examples of female grace. *The Mirror* suggest that Ignat as an adult is replaying his father’s infidelity, yet it is hard to grasp why (without dragging in one’s own speculation), given the almost incandescent idealization of the wife/mother here, which does not carry with it any of the ambiguous charge that so often accompanies the equivalent character in American movies and literature.

The salient emotion at the heart of *The Mirror* appears to be a deep longing for a state of Eden-before-the-Fall innocence and bliss, which Tarkovsky typically locates in exquisite



THE MIRROR

images of natural flux and flow refracted through the prism of childhood, when every detail of daily life, however, commonplace, had an aura of enigma about it. Accordingly, the most resonant moments of this movie are those that capture these jewelled fragments of Ignat’s “past recaptured:” a reverie of his mother levitating above her sickbed, a winter bird nesting momentarily in his cap, a sudden squall rising without warning to shake a field and then vanishing just as suddenly, to name just a few. At its best, *The Mirror* does catch the sensation which Tarkovsky’s father headily evokes when he writes of “Life’s swift needle (which) draws me on like a thread.” But because neither Ignat nor his mother nor any other consciousness generates enough force or clarity, this vortex of images finally registers on our own memories like distant, faded recollections from past life (or movies) which, when re-examined, prove to be either distorted or even nonexistent. The result is a pervasive sense of chaos, breakdown, the beauties of the past not crystallized in art but whirling away, unrecaptured and finally extinguished. *The Mirror*, with its pantheistic-lyrical whirlpool of regret and old desire, ends up a beautiful bewilderment.

With *The Stalker*, Tarkovsky has returned to straight-line, though not conventional, story-telling. The hero, a single-minded visionary, sneaks two outlanders (American, like himself, in the film’s loose source, a novel called *Picnic by the Roadside*, but evidently

Russian in the movie, though metaphorically All People) into The Zone. They are a Writer and a Scientist, both as anomic as the spaceman of *Solaris* and both, like their guide, nameless. Whatever may have created the Zone and its reputed magic (hints center on a meteor, like one which is said to have crashed into Siberia some years ago), the two wayfarers, each a variation on your basic disillusioned intellectual, are making their foray, past barbed wire and border guards, in the hope that their shaman can lead them to a renewal of sapped faith and vigor. As they proceed over land which proves to have some science-fiction traits, like odorless flowers, for instance, the thought arises that Tarkovsky is presenting us with an elongated (165 minute) episode of "The Twilight Zone." At times, when the Writer and the Scientist fall to discoursing about the roles and the weaknesses of art and science, the parallel with the late Rod Serling's show-ending aphorisms seems even stronger. But the climax of their sortie silences them and these thoughts, when the Room not only proves impotent to live up to its reputation but also turns out to be a near-twin of the Stalker's wretched house, where he ekes out bare subsistence with his wife and their crippled little girl. *The Stalker*, then, is a negative image of both *Solaris* and *Andrei Roublev*. Their journeys through hell end in serenity; here the result is a deepened disillusionment.

*The Stalker* begins in tinted black-and-white, almost as if there were mildew in the emulsion. Yet the effect is stingingly clear as the camera slowly (*slowly*) moves over the hero and his family as they sleep in their hovel on the fringes of a pollution-spewing modern city (actually located in Estonia). Just as an aura of latent, lyrical possibility emanated from the dacha, the woods, and the meadows in *Solaris* and from the wind-ruffled foliage and vistas of *The Mirror*, the opening sequences of *The Stalker* exude bleakness, rattiness, stagnation like noxious fumes. It is as though the whole world has taken on the character of a weedy, diseased railroad siding. Tarkovsky uses his slow pacing and camerawork to heighten our desire to break out and brave the Zone with his three explorers. This method links him to what Kubrick did with similar pacing in *2001*, which also centers on the lure of exploring the unknown for people mired in mundane life at its most stultifying. All through *2001*, watching apes stumble toward their great discovery of the bone as tool-weapon and astronauts float endlessly through their Jupiter Mission, we

long to speed things up, only to be held back by the inexorable measured drift of the film, which will reach its goals in its own good time, not ours. This effect translates directly into cinematic terms the frustrations of exploring in any form (for knowledge or enlightenment as well as new realms)—the dogged labor, the blind alleys, the slowness of discovery, the difficulty of making leaps to new ideas or approaches. This is a primary component of the "trance" style, and Tarkovsky uses it in *The Stalker*, both before and after we and his characters make it into the Zone.

But our arrival there is not like our arrival in Kubrick's Louis XIV room after a slit-scan trip into intergalactic space or, to bring up another comparison that is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first, our arrival in Oz. Both of these are enchanted realms, alive with mystery and promise, hot with blazing colors and weird sounds. But the Zone, even compared to the hellhole from which the Stalker and his companions emerge, is quite unprepossessing, neither beautiful nor especially otherworldly, like the natural wonderlands of *Solaris*, *Andrei Roublev*, and *The Mirror*. Instead, it looks initially like an ordinary, dowdy wilderness. Accordingly, Tarkovsky brings up the intensity of his color just slightly from the monochrome look of the opening scenes and never makes it ravishing, as he has done in the past. For the Zone, too, proves to be a large illusion. Even though the Stalker, for instance, tries to lay down the law about how his charges must proceed if they are to reach the Room, they violate them several times without coming to any harm. Much of the land proves to be as littered with civilization's garbage as the outer world does; again reversing key images of *Solaris*, Tarkovsky shows us waterways in the Zone choked with junk; even with armed patrols and a fence to protect it, the region cannot remain clean. The trio's long struggle through some kind of subterranean culvert suggests an abandoned subway or sewer system. There is no Yellow Brick Road in the Zone.

What holds this threnody of gloom together and makes it moving is not just Tarkovsky's poeticizing style, though it functions with eerie brilliance throughout the film. It is the image created by Alexander Kaidanovsky in the title role. Looking as though he had just crawled out of a Gulag or an inner city ghetto or some post-cataclysm bomb shelter, this half-demented seer-freak, with a bald head and a contorted face that looks torn from a boulder, is the most vivid human element in Tarkovsky's work

since Natalie Bondarchuk's wife. One weakness of Tarkovsky's allegorizing methods has been the tendency of most of his characters, both their natures and their very faces, to fade in recollection, like most of *The Mirror* and the Stalker's two companions. But Kaidanovsky's face is an icon of pain to place alongside Umberto D. When the Room proves to be sterile, we realize that he has lost absolutely the final glimmer of hope for something resembling a truly human life. His chastened return to the outer world produces one staggering shot of a monstrous factory beside a river, along which he and his family walk in the foreground, while the factory spews masses of putrefaction as if to poison the very universe. Yet Tarkovsky does not pitch him headlong into the utter despondency which seems to await him, for he implies a saving resilience

in his crazy, dogged hero, who persists in believing that the Room has redeeming forces yet to reveal. We leave him a certifiable fool, yet perhaps a genuine seer as well.

This is also where Tarkovsky leaves us, poised between the edge of despair's abyss and the compensating incandescence of his images. Their heavy, intoxicating ether works on us even when it is at his most obscure or sententious, like some ancient mariner's spell. It is not a brew for everyone, commissar or capitalist; there is no use in pretending that his brand of work can expect any easier sledding in our commercial film world than in his own totalitarian one. Until we are able to see them more often, these strange pictures—exasperating and fascinating by turns—will remain as enigmatic to us as their maker.

LINDA WILLIAMS  
AND B. RUBY RICH

## The Right of Re-Vision: Michelle Citron's **Daughter Rite**\*

*The vast majority of literary and visual images of motherhood comes to us filtered through a collective or individual male consciousness. . . . We need to know what, out of that welter of image-making and thought-spinning, is worth salvaging, if only to understand better an idea so crucial in history, a condition which has been wrested from the mothers themselves to buttress the power of the fathers.*

—Adrienne Rich<sup>1</sup>

*Perhaps our current responsibility lies in humanizing our own activities so that they will communicate more effectively with all women. Hopefully we will aspire to more than women's art flooding the museum and gallery circuit (and screens). Perhaps a feminist art will only emerge when we become wholly responsible for our own work, for what becomes of it, who sees it, and who is nourished by it. For a feminist artist, whatever her style, the prime audience at this time is other women.*

—Lucy Lippard<sup>2</sup>

Within the form of the melodramatic Hollywood "woman's film," the mother-daughter relationship has long been a favorite theme, from *Stella Dallas* to *Mildred Pierce* to *The*

*Turning Point*. But even though they focus on the complex of emotions contained in the mother-daughter bond, such films are characterized by a hidden misogyny. Pretending to sanctify the institution of motherhood, they more often merely exalt its ideal while punishing and humiliating the individual women who participate in it.

At the heart of all these representations of the mother-daughter bond is a psychological truth that has been much discussed in recent writing<sup>3</sup> but which has perhaps been best described by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*.<sup>4</sup> According to Chodorow a son must ultimately repress or deny his original attachment to and identification with the mother's body to take on a more abstract and less primally connected identification with the father. But a daughter undergoes no such shift in gender identification; her primary identification with the mother remains with her always. This "oedipal asymmetry" causes the daughter to continue to experience herself as unseparated, continuous with others, making it difficult for the daughter to separate off from her mother to claim her own life. It is

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